Synopsis of the Books of the Bible

Lamentations

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

Public domain edition

Introduction

The affections of the remnant to the King and those of the assembly

The Lamentations of Jeremiah — a touching expression of the interest which God feels in the afflictions which His people undergo on account of their sins — will not require much explanation as to the general meaning of the book. A few remarks may be useful, to show the true character of this book, and its connection with the dealings of God, as revealed to us elsewhere. The first interesting point — to which I have already alluded — is that the affliction of His people does not escape the eye of God. He is afflicted in their affliction: His Spirit takes knowledge of it; and, acting in the heart of those whose mouth He uses, gives expression to the feelings He has produced there. Thus Christ wept over the hard-heartedness of Jerusalem, and invited its inhabitants to do so likewise. And here also His Spirit not only reproves and reveals things to come; He gives a form to the grief of those who love what God loves, and furnishes the expression of it Himself.

Summary

The unique and remarkable character of the Book

This Book of Lamentations is remarkable because we see in it the expression of the thoughts of the Spirit of God, that is, those produced in persons under His influence, the vessels of His testimony, when God was forced to set aside that which He had established in the world as His own. There is nothing similar in the whole circle of the revelations and of the affections of God. He says Himself, How could He treat them as Admah and Zeboim? Christ went through it in its fullest extent. But He went through it in His own perfection with God. He acted thus with regard to Jerusalem, and wept over it. But here man is found to have lost the hope of God's interposing on His people's behalf. God would not abandon a man who was one of this people, who loved them, who understood that God loved them, that they were the object of His affection. He was one of them. How could he bear the idea that God had cast them off? No doubt God would re-establish them. But in the place where God had set them, all hope was lost for ever. In the Lord's own presence it is never lost. It is in view of this that all these exercises of heart are gone through, until the heart can fully enter into the mind and affections of God Himself. Indeed this is always true.

The ways of the God and the heart that feels His judgment

The Spirit gives us here a picture of all these exercises. How gracious! To see the Spirit of God enter into all these details, not only of the ways of God, but of that also which passes through a heart in which the judgment of God is felt by grace, until all is set right in the presence of God Himself. Inspiration gives us, not only the perfect thoughts of God, and Christ the perfection of man before God, but also all the exercises produced in our poor hearts, when the perfect Spirit acts in them, so far as these thoughts, all mingled as they are, refer in the main to God, or are produced by Him. So truly cares He for us! He hearkens to our sighs, although much of imperfection and of that which belongs to our own heart is

mixed with them. It is this that we see in the Book of Lamentations, in the Psalms, and elsewhere, and abundantly, though in another manner, in the New Testament.

Chapter 1

Sore affliction: confession of sin and of Jehovah's righteous judgment

There is nothing more affecting than the sentiments produced in the heart by the conviction that the subject of affliction is beloved of God, that He loves that which He is obliged to smite, and is obliged to smite that which He loves. The prophet, while laying open the affliction of Jerusalem, acknowledges that the sin of the people had caused it. Could that diminish the sorrow of his heart? If on the one hand it was a consolation, on the other it humbled and made him hide his face. The pride of the enemy, and their joy in seeing the affliction of the beloved of God, give occasion to sue for compassion on behalf of the afflicted, and judgment on the malice of the enemy. At the end of chapter 1, after full confession that it was Judah's sin that had brought the evil upon them, and that Jehovah was righteous, the people call on the eye of Jehovah to look on their sorrow, and judge those by whose wickedness they were punished.

Chapter 2

The touching appeal to Jehovah: the desolation of Jerusalem His work

The second chapter is a very deep and touching appeal. The desolation of Jerusalem is looked at as Jehovah's own work, on what was His own, and not as that of the enemy. Never had there been such sorrow. Not only had He polluted the kingdom and its princes, and had been as an enemy against Jerusalem, and all that was goodly in it, but He had cast down His altar, abhorred His sanctuary. He no longer respected what He had Himself set up. Only we must remember that it was when the relationships of Jehovah with His people depended, however long God's patience, on the faithfulness of the people's obedience to Jehovah, on the old covenant. But this consideration gives room for appealing to Himself. Still it is a solemn thing when Jehovah is forced to reject that which He acknowledges to be His own. But it must be so if the association of His name is only a means of falsifying the testimony of what He is (v. 6, 7). And this brings before us the amazingly important principle contained in the ministry of Jeremiah, not merely the substitution of Babylon and the Gentile empire for Jerusalem and God's government in Israel, but the setting this last aside in itself, the ground of God's relationship with man where it subsisted, as that which could not subsist when put to the test.

Chapter 3

The Spirit of Christ in the remnant, suffering for the testimony and for its rejection

In Lamentations 3 we find the language of faith, of sorrowing faith, of the Spirit of Christ in the remnant, on the occasion of the judgment of Jerusalem in which God had dwelt. Before, the prophet (or the Spirit of Christ in him) spoke in the name of Jerusalem, deploring her sufferings and confessing her sin, while appealing to Jehovah against her enemies, relating what He had done in forsaking His sanctuary, and (from Lam. 2:11) expressing the depth of her affliction at the sight of the evil. But in chapter 3 he places himself in the midst of the evil to express the sentiments of the Spirit of Christ; not, it is true, in an absolute manner, according to the perfection of Christ Himself, but as acting in the heart of the prophet (as is generally the case in Jeremiah), expressing his personal distress — a distress produced by the Spirit, but clothed in the feelings of the prophet's own heart — to bring out that which practically was going on in the heart of a faithful Israelite, the reality of that which was most elevated in that day of anguish and affliction, in which alas! there was no more hope from the people's side than from that of the enemies who attacked them, and in which the heart of the faithful suffered without hope of remedy, yet much more on account of a people who hearkened not to the voice of Jehovah, than on account of enemies raised up in judgment. What has Christ not suffered! That which His Spirit produces in the midst of human weakness, He has Himself undergone and felt in its full extent; only that He was perfect in all that His heart went through in His affliction.

In chapter 3 the prophet expresses then in his own person, by the Spirit of Christ, all that he felt as sharing the affliction of Israel, and being at the same time the object of their enmity — a position remarkably analogous to that of Christ. What suffering can be like that of one who shares the suffering of God's people without being able to turn away the evil, because they refuse to hear God's message — like that of one who bears this affliction on his heart with the feeling that, if this foolish people would but have hearkened, the wrath of God should have been turned away? It was the lamentation of Christ Himself, "Oh, if thou hadst known," etc. In the main Jeremiah partook of the same feelings. But we see him more as being of the people, and participating in his own person in the consequences of the evil, seeing himself under these consequences with the people, because they had rejected his testimony. This may be said of the Lord at the close of His life, or on the cross. But we see that this sentiment, a little known in the case of Job, takes here the form of a personal prayer, complaining of personal suffering. Jeremiah suffers for the testimony, and for the rejection of the testimony. The first nineteen verses of chapter 3 contain the expression of this state. It is altogether the spirit of the remnant; and, with the exception of the sentiment I have just mentioned, it is that expressed in many of the Psalms. Into it all indeed, if we go on to the cross,* Christ Himself entered. {* I add, "if we go on to the cross," because, though Christ may have felt much of it in His sorrow as He approached the cross, there are expressions which apply to Him only as suffering there. The direct proper application is to the remnant, as is the case with the Psalms, and to Jeremiah in particular.}

Turning in faith to the One who smites

The prophet speaks as having borne in his own heart the deep grief of that which Jehovah had brought upon Jerusalem; but feeling it as one who knew God to be his God, so that he could experience what it was to be the object of the wrath of God. He suffered with Jerusalem, and he suffered for Jerusalem. But the truth of this relation with Jehovah, while making him feel the affliction more deeply, sustained

him also (v. 22). He begins to feel that, after all, it is better to have to do with Jehovah, although, in another point of view, this made it all the more painful. He feels that it is good to be afflicted, and to wait upon Jehovah who smites: for He will not cast off for ever. He does not afflict willingly, but from necessity. Why complain of the chastening of sin? It were better to turn unto Jehovah.* He encourages Israel to do so, and while remembering the affliction of his weeping people, faith is in exercise until Jehovah shall interpose. It is well that an affliction like this should be felt; the only harm is when it is allowed to weaken confidence in the Lord. {* We have here a principle of the deepest interest, and most instructive. I will follow it out with a little more detail. The principles are in the text. Jehovah smiting His own altar and all the holy things, having been set up by Himself in the midst of His people as marking them as His and the formal link with them as their God, their destruction which broke that formal link, as far as God's own ordinances went, put an end to the connection; and this, as one of that people and living in that bond, had been the deepest distress to the true-hearted Jeremiah; but while this, because they were of God, pressed upon his heart, it led him, when he had got to the depth of the feeling, to the Jehovah whose ordinances they were; Jehovah known in his heart takes then the place of the ordinances which bound the people to Him, and his soul is drawn out in confidence to Him who was within and beyond all those links. He feels and speaks from the place of affliction, but his soul is humbled in him when personally thus in intercourse with Jehovah, and so has hope. And this is a sure and immovable anchor of faith when God our Father is truly known (see v. 22-26). He is brought quite low and subdued in spirit, but Jehovah is before his soul and known, though he must wait for Him (v. 27-30), but Jehovah rises up before him. He does not afflict willingly; and now he turns in greater calmness of spirit to try his own ways (v. 39-42). Yet he looks fully at all the sorrow (v. 42-49). But now Jehovah is in his heart, and the "till" (v. 50), the full assurance of which flows from His very nature, for personally, when at the lowest, he had called and Jehovah had drawn near to him, and pleaded the cause of his soul, and he looks for Jehovah's judgment on his relentless and causeless enemies. No doubt the call for judgment is characteristic of Jehovah's relationship with Israel. Still, there will be such on all the open enemies of the Lord.}

Having been succoured himself, the prophet can assure others of God's kindness

The prophet calls to mind the affliction of Jerusalem, and, remembering the way which he had been succoured himself, he makes use of the kindness he had experienced to confirm his assurance that God would shew the same kindness to the people. But with respect to the proud and careless who reject the truth, their enmity against God, manifesting itself in their enmity against those who were the bearers of His word, he asks for the judgment of God upon them.* Thus relieved in spirit, and his heart filled with the sentiment that, since the evil came from Jehovah, that which gave so much depth to the sorrow was also a comfort to the heart, he can return to the affliction itself, measuring its whole extent, which the anguish of his soul prevented his apprehending till he had been able to arrive at its true source. Now he can enter into details, although with deep grief, yet with more calmness because His heart is with God. The sense of trouble and distress at the thought of God's judgment falling on those whom He loves is not sinful, although in Jeremiah's case his heart sometimes failed him. {* In all this the spirit of these passages is wonderfully in accordance with that of the Psalms, as indeed is very natural. The way in

which Christ entered into it is spoken of in what is said on the Book of Psalms. Christ passed, in grace, through all exercises as to it in perfectness — Jeremiah and the remnant, that they might be perfected in their own state and feeling as to it. See what follows in the text.}

Christ's profound distress at God's judgment

It is right to be troubled, and, as it were, overwhelmed, at God's breaking, not perhaps the relationship, but His present connection with that which was the object of His favour, that which bore the name and the testimony of God. Christ felt this for Himself, though in Him distress went much farther: "Now is my soul troubled, and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour." Only in Christ all is perfect; and if He feels in perfection the profound distress of the object of God's love becoming the object of His judgment, a feeling of unparalleled grief, seeing it at the same time according to the perfection of God's ways, He can say, "For this cause came I unto this hour; Father, glorify thy name!" He was Himself the necessary object of all God's affection, and consequently (if the judgment was to glorify God) the object also of a perfect judgment, that is, of a complete forsaking on God's part. That which is dreadful in this thought is, that the change of relative position was absolute and perfect in His case according to the very perfection of the relationship. He suffered the forsaking of God, instead of enjoying infinite favour which He knew.

The difference between the place of Jeremiah and that of the perfect Man — Christ

There was something similar in the case of Jerusalem; and Jeremiah, feeling by the Spirit of Christ the preciousness of this relationship, and entering into it as sharing it, he suffers with that which was thus judged of God. Only, although moved by the Spirit of Christ, he must find the equilibrium of his thoughts, he must seek Jehovah to bring Him into the affliction, amidst all his personal grief, and the true but human workings of a heart that was shaken and cast down by the circumstances. He attached himself to Jerusalem, as resting on her position before God, and not solely and absolutely for God, and as God Himself, as did our blessed Lord. There was an object between his soul and God (an object beloved also by God), and it was not loved absolutely in God, and with the affection of God, and hence the affliction had to reach this object, he being in it and of it, reach his heart in this place — and then God draw it to Himself, so that he may look at all from Jehovah's view of it. But Christ was Himself absolutely in the place, for God's glory and the salvation of others. The judged thing from which He was infinitely far, even as man, he was to be before God. Ever perfect, He learned to the absolute fulness what it was to be this before God, and glorified God there. But this, though we know it true, none can fathom. There was in Jeremiah the right foundation, and he finds Jehovah, first of all in spite of the affliction, but soon in the affliction itself, and he recovers himself immediately, not from the affliction, but in the affliction, by the power of God. Christ can say, "How often would I have gathered," etc. This was the affection of God. Jeremiah confesses sin, and ought to confess it, as himself in the place, though a testimony of God in it. But this thought changes so far the character of the feeling (see Lam. 1:19-20).

Christ sought for nothing as a resource, as if self were concerned in it. His affliction was unmixed and absolute to Himself alone, more profound (for who could share it?) but perfect as being His alone. Thus, in John 12, when it is Himself personally (for this Gospel sets the old vine aside as rejected), He cannot desire that the hour of God's forsaking should come; He ought to fear and be troubled, and He was therefore heard. But it is between God and Himself alone. No other thought comes in between — it is wholly with God. Alas! had it been possible, all was lost. But no; it is the absolute submission of the perfect man, who seeks (and seeks nothing else) that the name of God may be glorified according to God's perfection; that at all cost to Himself God's name may be glorified. Not now as God, who must necessarily maintain its glory, but as one who submits to everything, who sacrifices Himself, in order that God may glorify His name. For this cause He has been supremely glorified as man — a glorious mystery, in which the glory of God will shine forth throughout eternity.

Chapter 4

Jeremiah can measure the affliction since Jehovah is there

Jeremiah, having now found Jehovah in the affliction, tranquilly measures its whole extent. But this is itself a consolation. For after all Jehovah who changes not is there to comfort the heart. This is Lamentations 4. He calls the whole to mind, and contrasts that which Jerusalem was, when under the blessing of Jehovah, with that which His anger has produced. It is no longer only the overwhelming circumstances of the present scene, but what it was before God. The Nazarites pass before his thoughts; that which Jerusalem, as the city of the great King, had been even in the eyes of her enemies; the anointed of Jehovah, under whose shadow the people might have lived (as we have already seen), although the Gentiles ruled — the anointed of Jehovah had been taken in their pits, like the prey of the hunter. But the afflicted spirit of God's servant, who bears the burden of His people, can now estimate not only the affliction that overwhelms them, but the position of the enemies of Jerusalem, and that of the beloved city. Nay, he who would have one run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem to find a just one, now sees the enemies have slain the just in her midst (see v. 13 and Jer. 5:1). The cup of God's wrath shall pass through unto Edom, who was rejoicing in the ruin of the city of Jehovah; and as to Zion, she has doubtless drunk this cup to the dregs; but if she has done so, it was in order that she might drink of it no more. The punishment of her iniquity is accomplished, she shall no more be carried into captivity. All was finished for her: she had drunk the cup which she confessed she had deserved (see Lam. 4:11; Lam. 1:18-20). But the sin of haughty Edom should be laid bare. God would visit her iniquity.

Chapter 5

The whole affliction presented to God to call His compassionate attention to His people

The prophet can now present the whole affliction of the people to God, as an object of compassion and mercy. This is an onward step in the path of these deep exercises of heart. He is at peace with God; he is in His presence; it is no longer a heart struggling with inward misery. All is confessed before Jehovah who is faithful to His people, so that he can call on God to consider the affliction in order that He may remember His suffering people according to the greatness of His compassions. For Jehovah changes not (Lam. 5:19-21). The sense of the affliction remains in full, but God is brought in, and everything having been recalled and judged before Him, all that had happened being cleared up to the heart, Jeremiah can rest in the proper and eternal relations between God and His beloved people; and, shutting himself into his direct relations with his God, he avails himself of His goodness, as being in those relations, to find in the affliction of the beloved people an opportunity for calling His attention to them. This is the true position of faith — that which it attains as the result of its exercises before God at the sight of the affliction of His people (an affliction so much the deeper from its being caused by sin).